THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Message of the Stars

September 14, 1997
John M. Buchanan

The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the source of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is the center of true religion.

Albert Einstein

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE MESSAGE OF THE STARS

John M. Buchanan
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Psalm 19:1

One of the routines which has given order to my life for many years is an annual pilgrimage to the ocean. Because it is not unlike a religious pilgrimage, there are rituals to which we must adhere. We pretty much do the same things year after year, and one of the most important of those rituals occurs on the first night at the ocean and is repeated nightly thereafter. After the dinner dishes are cleared and cleaned and darkness has descended, we proceed down the walkway toward the beach to the small deck with benches overlooking the now very dark ocean. Without saying anything, everyone lies down to look at the stars. Some pilgrims, from whom age is stealing youthful suppleness, even carry blankets and a pillow to make lying on the wooden bench or deck more comfortable. Others do it too. Up and down the beach, porch lights are turned out so as not to reduce the incredibly vivid blackness of the night sky.

What you see lying on your back looking up into the sky is, of course, beyond description. The little devotional I use keeps me informed about stellar activity, and so we knew that Mars was in the southern sky and that on August 5th Venus, Mercury and a tiny sliver of moon almost converged shortly after sunset and then, on August 12th and 13th the Persid meteor shower occurred again, "part of a lost tail of a comet, now harnessed by our gravity," [*Daybook*], and that Jupiter rising in the southeastern sky is ten times brighter than any other object in the neighborhood.

On our first night – the best night for viewing because there was no moon, we saw a fabulous shooting star, a momentary bright flash streaking and then disappearing so suddenly that for a moment we were stunned and weren't sure we saw what we just saw, and from up and down the beach we could hear 'oohs' and 'aahs' and even a little applause.

Over the years, we've had our best discussions of theology lying there looking up at the starry night. "What's behind the stars, Daddy?" a child asked. And the same one, after a grandparent had died, "Will God die some day?"

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes, "Anyone who has ever wondered at the beauty of a sunrise, the awesome power of a storm, the vastness of prairie or mountain or ocean, the greening of the earth, the fruitfulness of a harvest, has potentially brushed up against an experience of the creative power of the mystery of God." [*She Who Is*, p. 125]

Now city dwellers are at a distinct disadvantage here. We can't see stars because of the massive electric light generated in the city. The aromas we inhale are not salt air or sweet smelling new-mown hay, but an amazing combination of diesel fuel combustion and Giordano's Pizza. The sounds we hear are not locusts, crickets and geese rising above the mists, but car alarms, a Harley gunning through the Lake Shore Drive underpass, screaming sirens. We know this about

ourselves: there is in us an actual – or a virtual – memory of the experience of nature and in order to reconnect we order flannel shirts from L.L. Bean, shop at Urban Outfitters and The North Face and wear boots designed for mountain climbing and ride down Michigan Avenue in four-wheel-drive all-terrain vehicles made for African safaris.

> "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge" …

a poet wrote some 2,500 years ago. He didn't have to contend with electric lights and he obviously wasn't on the beach in North Carolina, but I do see him lying on his back on a hillside on a night when there was no moon and the array of stars captivated his imagination and his heart. C.S. Lewis called Psalm 19 "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." [*Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 56] It sweeps together the entire genius of Judaism, the glory and goodness of creation, God's gift of the law to order and bless the life of the community, and a brilliant concluding prayer which is used every Sunday by countless preachers and congregations, including – every week – the clergy and choir of this church, preparing for worship…

> "May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer."

It is interesting to think for a moment about what that ancient poet, lying on his back, looking up, thought he was seeing.

It's really very logical. The sky he saw was, he concluded, an inverted bowl made of transparent material. It was called a firmament. On top of it was water. Water which sometimes fell through openings in the firmament and which, when illuminated by the sun, was brilliant blue – just like the waters of the great sea. There were tracks in the firmament for the sun and moon and stars. The whole apparatus was designed and managed by the Creator. Other people, by the way, came to similar scientific conclusions. Many concluded that the sun, moon and stars were deities. The people to the south, across the desert of Sinai, worshipped the sun (which come to think of it, is another ritual in the pilgrimage to the ocean, for many – now no longer politically correct or good for your health).

But the brilliant and profound theology of Israel, written by its poets, points beyond creation to the Creator, the one God.

We know more about what is actually out there, or what's not there, than the psalmist did. It took centuries, but eventually religion had to let go the worldview of the biblical writers. There is no firmament – there is space. The earth is not the center of a small universe, but one relatively small planet revolving around one star in a galaxy which occupies a vast emptiness with other galaxies – all moving away from one another at the speed of light.

Part of the tragedy of institutional religion is that some still cannot let go of the worldview of the biblical writers and in their insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible in matters of biology, astronomy, history – simply discredit the faith for many thoughtful people.

Because religion has often experienced science as a threat to what it thinks it knows, and then to its authority, the church has frequently opposed scientific inquiry, new truth discovered in laboratory or telescope, and condemned the scientists themselves … Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin.

Creationists are still trying to enforce the worldview of the Bible on the teaching of science in the public schools.

And so there has been a tragic and altogether unnecessary conflict in the public mind between science and religion and the broad assumption that one cannot be a scientist, or open to new truth and be a believer.

Part of it is our fault. But part of it also grew out of a notion that has been around for a few hundred years, namely that scientific truth is the only truth: that truth is truth only insofar as it can be observed by the physical senses, measured, weighed, analyzed.

Because religious claims cannot be weighed and analyzed and exist outside the scientific method, religion must not be talking about truth, but mythology, sentiment.

And then, fairly recently, something amazing began to happen to those assumptions. Not long ago, physicists were suggesting that we would soon know everything there was to know, discover all there is to discover and eliminate the unknown. We were close to a "field theory" that would explain everything!

And then something unexpected happened that presents religion with its greatest challenge and greatest opportunity. All of a sudden, what we thought we knew began to unravel. Professor John Cobb of Claremont School of Theology explains, "The emerging worldview is far more paradoxical in the sense of not conforming to our expectations than the Cartesian Newtonian worldview it replaces. The world is composed of things that have greater spontaneity than the material atoms of the 18th century – in short, instead of passive matter upon which God imposed laws of nature, we have a world of agents interacting with one another in immeasurable complex ways. Physicists now speak of complexity theory, self-organizing systems, holographic models. No one quite knows what this means," [*Reclaiming the Church*, p. 100]

My favorite scientist, the late Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer clinic, put it much more simply. "Learn from science how little we know, how still less we understand and how much there is to learn." [*The Fragile Species* p. 115]

Were you as fascinated as I was by the newspaper account of the love affair the people up at Lincoln Park Zoo are trying to arrange between two Siberian tigers, and did you note the fact that the best of our scientists have to admit that we really don't know the first thing about this business?

What a wonderful irony: that the science we thought was our greatest threat because it knows so much is now teaching us the ancient truth about mystery, a truth that used to be ours; that when it comes to ultimate truth, the most appropriate posture is modesty, silence, reverence ... not propounding, proclaiming, shouting, condemning, excommunicating.

In a wonderful new book, William Placher, who teaches religion at Wabash College, proposed that the three giants who dominated theology before the Enlightenment, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and John Calvin, are worth re-examining because the three of them, although very different, affirmed the ultimate mystery of God and the serious mistake of claiming to know too much. Aquinas wrote, "Human beings reach the highest point of their knowledge about God when they know that they know him not."

I love the way Augustine said, "Si comprendis, non est deus, (if you have understood, then what you have understood is not God)."

There is a danger of thinking we know it all, a 'tyranny of certitude' someone called it. My truth is better than your truth. My truth is ultimate truth and it is my God-given responsibility to do what I have to to get you to renounce your truth and adopt mine. It is a difficult subject, of course. We believe in Jesus Christ who is God's truth. We believe God calls us to share that truth with the world. But so often our zeal has become religious self-righteousness, arrogance, closed-mindedness, and sometimes, violence.

That's the danger and tragedy of the various fundamentalisms sweeping the world. Christians launch crusades which feel like violence to Muslims, Muslim fundamentalists murder in Algeria for the one true faith. In Vinkovsci, Croatia, we were shown the Roman Catholic Cathedral bombed by Serbian Orthodox zealots and the Orthodox Cathedral bombed by Roman Catholic zealots. And in Northern Ireland the only parties not at the peace negotiations are the Protestants, one of them led by a defrocked Presbyterian minister.

Scholars who know about these things suggest that the man who wrote it was in exile with the rest of his nation: that things were not going well at all, that life was full of disorder and chaos and suffering and death: that his heart was breaking because of the humiliation of his people and their faith and their God. So it is perhaps a desperate and very brave affirmation which flies in the face of the grim reality of his own life.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God."

That is, even though nothing around me remotely suggests that God is God and all is right with the world, the fact is God <u>is</u> God and all <u>will</u> be well and the heavens <u>do</u> declare God's reality, God's ultimate victory, God's blessed life-giving presence.

Walter Brueggemann says the Psalm's purpose is to assure the community and perhaps the poet himself that life is lived under "a sacred canopy and therefore life can be lived in freedom from anxiety." [*The Message of the Psalms*, p. 26]

Wouldn't it be something, as this fabulous century winds down and a new millennium begins, if religion, in the midst of all the ethnic, racial and religious violence, began to practice and then teach spiritual modesty instead of beginning with aggressive proclamations of absolute truth – inviting everybody to confess that God is a mystery and that the human mind cannot contain God. Wouldn't it be wonderful if religion learned again the importance of reverence and awe and the blessedness of a little silence, because the truth is so big, because God, in order to be God, is mysterious, because the creation continues to mystify us with its complexity and breathtaking beauty whether we are looking at the heavens or holding a newborn infant.

It was Albert Einstein, of all people, who reminded us of the mystery behind reality and that it is in the face of mystery that science and religion are not threats to one another, but collaborators, engaged in a joint venture. It was the most important scientist of our century who understood that the experience of mystery behind creation is the source of all true science and the center of all true religion. "Science without religion is lame," he wrote. "Religion without science is blind."

Back to the poet, lying on a hillside, looking at the stars. Things were not well with him, and what the experience of God's mystery meant to him was that regardless of what was going on around him, God's reality, God's will, God's purpose, God's blessing, is not negated. God is and will be God. God's people – no matter what is happening, are free to live in peace and assurance and joy.

That is the good news, the message in the stars.

Even when nature seems to turn against us: when things don't turn out the way they are supposed to: when the car crashes in the tunnel, or a heart attack strikes down a friend in the prime of his life, or a child is caught in the crossfire on the west side, or a good woman and her oncologist wage a major war against deadly malignancy, especially in those times which have come and will come to us all, the heavens tell the glory of God.

Professor John Carmody lost his personal battle to cancer last year. He wrote a little book, *Psalms for Times of Trouble*, prayers based on psalms. Of Psalm 19 he wrote,

> Dear God, "We are immune to many pathogens, yet sometimes our immune system turns against us. What should we infer from our bodies?
>
> As we barrel toward death, a straight shot to oblivion, what ought our song to be?
>
> Naked we came into the world and naked we leave, but sometimes we dress like kings for sometimes you touch us with love."

That, friends, is what we believe. That behind the mystery there is love. That the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. That the heavens tell the glory of God.

This religion of ours is based on the conviction that there is a reality behind the mystery: a God who is before time, and will be after time: a God whose mystery was so real to our Hebrew forbears that they declined even to pronounce the name of God. This religion of ours suggests that you cannot "know" God. This religion of ours invites us to acknowledge the mystery, invites us, in the busyness of our hurried lives, to look and listen to the message of the stars...to find some place, some time, even if only in memory, or meditation, or sitting in a pew in a church on Michigan Avenue, to lie back and look up into the vastness of a night sky.

And to trust ... that behind the mystery there is a God of love ... and that under God's 'sacred canopy' human life – your life and mine – may be lived in freedom and peace and joy.

Our religion invites us to trust because one night long ago mystery and love and blessing and peace came among us in the darkness and the angels sang and a star rose and the heavens declared – shouted out – the glory of God.

* * * * *

God of mystery, we thank you for the vastness of the universe, the intricate complexity of matter, the miracle of all life. We do praise you for your creation. Even more, O God, we are silent before the mystery of your love for us and your promise to be our God. In this worship and in the week ahead, remind us, help us, to hear the heavens declaring your glory – your love, in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.